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ABSTRACT

During the last quarter of the 20th century, a global surge of democracy has transformed international relations and inspired people in places throughout the world. The current and continuing wave of democracy in the governments of nation-states has brought about a correspondingly strong surge of education for democracy. This rising tide of international interest in education for democracy has stimulated fresh thinking about education for democracy in the United States. What is a good education for democracy? What are the essential elements of an education in schools that would prepare students to be good citizens of a democracy? This paper presents and explains seven essential elements of education for democracy in schools. The long and difficult road from totalitarian dictatorship to democracy and liberty reminds people that the transition from one political system to another, and the subsequent consolidation of it, is never easy and quick. Through a good education for democracy in schools, students learn that the future success of their government and civil society depends ultimately on citizens themselves. (Contains 12 references.) (BT)

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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

By John J. Patrick, Indiana University, USA

December 5, 2002 (Riga, Latvia)

In 1848, Karl Marx wrote, "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism." Well, Marx's specter has disappeared, and in today's world, the ideal of democracy has grandly replaced it. During the last quarter of the 20th century, there has been a global surge of democracy that has transformed international relations and inspired peoples in places throughout the world. The current and continuing wave of democracy in the governments of nation-states has brought about a correspondingly strong surge of education for democracy. In particular, I know that leaders in post-communist countries, such as Latvia, have recognized that the development of an authentic democracy depends, in large part, upon the education of competent citizens, who know what democracy is and what it is not, who know how to practice democracy, and who know why it is good—or at least better than the alternatives to it.

The rising tide of international interest in education for democracy has stimulated fresh thinking about education for democracy in the United States of America. As educators from around the world have turned to us for advice about how to teach democracy, we Americans have been challenged to think more carefully about what it is, how to do it, and how to justify it. My ongoing discussions with colleagues in Latvia, for example, have led to renewal and refinement of my thinking about education for democracy. During the past 13 years, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have thought and talked again and again with colleagues in America, Latvia, and other countries about two related questions. What is a good education for democracy? And what are the essential elements of an education in schools that would prepare students to be good citizens of a democracy?

During the remainder of my lecture, I will present to you **seven** essential elements of education for democracy in schools. My experience has taught me that these elements are necessary qualities of a good education for democracy. I recognize that the **seven** elements I will present to you are **not** sufficient to a good education for democracy. However, if any one of these **seven** elements is omitted or neglected, then the student's education for democracy will be flawed. So, what are these **seven** essential elements?

The first essential element of a good education for democracy is a systematic and continual emphasis on teaching and learning knowledge of the concepts of democracy, democratic government, and democratic society. If students would be prepared for effective and responsible participation in a democracy, then they must know what it is and what it is **not**. They must know the standards or criteria by which we distinguish democratic governments and societies from those that are **not** democratic. Most scholars agree about the minimal standard by which to judge whether or not a government is a democracy: it is minimally a democracy if the people's representatives in government are elected in free, fair, open, and competitive elections, and the electorate is inclusive so that a large majority of the people who live under the government's authority have the right to vote. Thus, there is government by consent of the governed in which the people's representatives are accountable to the people.

If our students are to be well educated about the concept of democracy, however, they need to know more than the minimal definition that pertains only to standards for conducting elections of the people's representatives in government. They must learn that a more fully developed democracy exceeds the minimal electoral standard by providing constitutional guarantees for civil liberties and rights of all the people living in the society under the government's authority. In a fully developed democracy, there is a people's government, which is limited by the supreme law of the people's Constitution, for the purpose of protecting equally, through the rule of law, the rights of everyone in the society. In particular, there is constitutional protection for the individual's rights to think, speak, decide, and act freely to influence the policies and actions of the government. Thus, there is majority rule with protection of the rights of everyone, including individuals in the minority.

The most rigorous test of whether or not a society is fully democratic, with freedom and justice for all, is this question. Are unpopular individuals and groups in the minority secure in their enjoyment of rights and opportunities on equal terms with others in the society? If the answer is yes, then the government and society are fully democratic. However, no democratic government and society in the world fully meets this test.

At present, according to the annual global surveys of Freedom House,

an American nongovernmental organization, less than half of the world's democracies satisfy the stringent criterion by which they may be judged fully democratic and free. If students would have a good education for democracy, they should learn how to use the criteria by which we minimally distinguish a democracy from a non-democracy and a more fully developed democracy from one that is less developed.

The second essential element of a good education for democracy is teaching and learning knowledge of the Constitution and institutions of the democratic government and civil society in which the students live. A good education for democracy in Latvia necessarily includes systematic instruction about the principles of the Constitution, the institutions of government under this Constitution, and the nongovernmental institutions that constitute the civil society. As they learn about the constitutional government and civil society of their country, students in Latvia should be challenged continuously to use the criteria by which we recognize a democracy to assess or critically appraise the extent to which Latvian governmental institutions and civil society organizations are or are **not** in conformity to world-wide standards for democracy and freedom. And Latvian students should be asked to compare their government and civil society with the governments and civil societies of other nations in terms of the generally accepted criteria for democracy. They should be challenged to make judgments about whether or not their government and civil society are more or less democratic and free than those of other countries.

The third essential element of a good education for democracy is development of the student's propensity and capacity to apply or use knowledge to think and participate competently in a democracy. Basic knowledge of democracy—its principles, practices, and history—ought to be applied by individuals to the civic and political events of the past and present; if so, this knowledge can be learned thoroughly and used constructively in their lives. So, students need to learn skills of cognition and skills of participation in concert with their acquisition of knowledge.

Cognitive skills enable individuals to identify, describe, organize, interpret, explain, and evaluate information and ideas in order to make sense of their experiences and to make decisions about them. If they develop cognitive skills, they can respond to their experiences reasonably and

effectively, and when confronted by public issues, for example, they can make and defend decisions about them, as a good citizen should do.

Participation skills, used in concert with cognitive skills, enable individuals to cooperate with others to monitor and influence the actions and decisions of their government and to make their representatives in government accountable to them. Participation skills, when conjoined with cognitive skills, also enable individuals to cooperate with others as leaders and followers in the nongovernmental organizations that constitute their civil society and thereby to act for the common good. So, education for democracy in schools must include lessons and projects that involve students cooperatively in active learning of skills that enable them to participate constructively in their government and civil society.

The fourth essential element of a good education for democracy involves the development of civic virtue and the behavioral dispositions of the good citizen in a democracy. Civic virtue entails the subordination of personal interests to the common good of the community to which one belongs. If students would develop civic virtue, they must practice the behavioral dispositions or habits of the good citizen in a democracy. Examples of these democratic dispositions are temperance or self-regulation, courage, loyalty, compassion, charity, tolerance, civility, honesty, fortitude, concern for social justice, and respect for the worth and dignity of each person in the community. These traits of good character constitute the moral foundations of a democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who went to the United States in the 1830s and wrote *Democracy in America,* was impressed by the democratic dispositions of Americans, who readily gave their time, money, and other resources to the nongovernmental associations of the civil society, which contributed extensively to the common good. He called these behavioral dispositions "the habits of the heart" and claimed that democracy could not work well without them. According to Tocqueville, a country with the very best constitution, institutions, and laws will **not** have a sustainable democracy unless "the habits of the heart" are firmly implanted in the character of the citizens. So, students in schools must be involved in

activities that require them to demonstrate civic virtue through persistent practice of the dispositions or traits of morality that sustain a healthy and vibrant democracy..

The fifth essential element of a good education for democracy is the systematic connection and integration of basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in the curriculum and instruction presented to students. Effective teaching and learning of knowledge about democracy, for example, requires that it be integrated with skills of cognition, skills of participation, and moral dispositions of the good citizen. All the necessary components of a good education for democracy—knowledge, skills, and dispositions—must be continually connected through activities that involve application of knowledge through the persistent practice of skills and dispositions. Elevation of one component of education for democracy over the other components—for example, knowledge over skills and dispositions or vice-versa—is a flaw that impedes teaching and learning about the theory and practice of democracy. So, basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions must be continually, systematically, and dynamically interrelated to bring about an effective education for democracy.

The sixth essential element of a good education for democracy is to teach knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democracy throughout the curriculum of the school. Teaching and learning the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democracy should begin in the primary school and continue at every grade or level to the completion of secondary school or high school. And there should be lessons about democracy in various school subjects, such as history, literature, economics, and geography in addition to separate courses in the subjects of civics and government. In particular, I urge the inclusion of lessons about the history of democracy in courses on world history, European history, and the history of particular countries, such as Latvia and the United States of America. As students move from lower to higher grades in schools, they should study more complexly and deeply the same ideas, skills, and dispositions that constitute the core of a good education for democracy. Thus, they might master these ideas, skills, and dispositions by the time they complete their last required year of school.

The seventh essential element of a good education for democracy is involvement of students in extracurricular activities that can be connected to the formal teaching and learning experiences required by the curriculum and conducted by teachers in the classrooms of schools. There is a strong relationship between participation in student organizations and team sports and achievement of democratic skills and dispositions. In particular, participation in student government activities can provide opportunities for learning democracy by doing it. Desirable outcomes are maximized, however, when there are strong connections between learning experiences within the curriculum and those in extracurricular activities.

Students' achievement of democratic skills and dispositions is increased greatly when the teacher establishes and maintains a democratic ethos in the classroom, which encourages free and open expression of ideas, security for freedom of inquiry, and respect for the dignity and worth of each person in the group. Likewise, development of students' democratic skills and dispositions through extracurricular activities is enhanced when an ethos or spirit of democracy pervades the meetings of student organizations as a consequence of the school's administrative policies.

In conclusion, the seven essential elements of a good education for democracy are necessary if not sufficient to the preparation of students for life in the democracy of Latvia, the United States of America, or any other country of our world. And these seven essential elements are necessary to the maintenance of democracy in any country that has it and desires to keep it. These seven elements certainly are not all there is to a good education for democracy; as you know, there is more to it. But, without them, education for democracy is not complete and not likely to achieve its purposes. The maintenance and improvement of democracy in Latvia, the United States, or anywhere else will not happen unless there is good education for democracy in schools, which transmits to each new generation of children the basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by which citizens make their democracy work. So, educators in Latvia, America, and elsewhere, if they would fulfill their large responsibilities to the future well being of their country, must emphasize the seven essential elements of education for democracy in the curriculum of their schools and the teaching and learning of their students.

The task of making a transition to democracy and then sustaining it

can be difficult, as the recent history of post-communist countries has shown us. While the demise of Soviet-style communism was complete, the development of new democracies has been partial and sometimes painful. As you know very well, there were 28 states that abandoned communism during and after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, less than half of them have met the generally accepted standards by which we distinguish a democracy from a non-democracy. Some of these countries are outright dictatorships with few if any democratic tendencies, and several of them, including Russia and Ukraine, seem to vacillate unpredictably, back and forth, between manifestations of democracy and dictatorship.

The long and difficult road from totalitarian dictatorship to democracy and liberty reminds us that the transition from one political system to another, and the subsequent consolidation of it, is never easy and quick. It is the long-term work of generations, not the quick-fix of a moment in time. And a fundamental part of this long-term project is education for democracy in schools.

Through a good education for democracy in schools, our students will learn that the future success of their government and civil society depends ultimately on citizens, just like them. However, without basic knowledge of democracy, skills of cognition and participation in democracy, and dispositions that buttress democracy, citizens cannot sustain and improve their democracy. Indeed, without essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions, individuals are citizens in name only, because they lack the capacity and power to make good decisions, to carry out their decisions, and to influence their government, as citizens in a democracy are expected to do. Let us, then, resolve to do what it takes to provide our students with the good education for democracy, based on my seven essential elements, that is required if they would sustain and improve their democratic government and civil society.

Thank you for your kind attention to my remarks. I look forward to my participation in the remainder of your conference and to my continued interaction with many of you about the challenges and possibilities of preparing our students to be competent citizens of a democracy; which, despite its imperfections, is the best type of regime our world has known.

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